

July 27, 1977

GK: Gertrude Keil

RK: Richard Keil

I: Interviewer

GK: We are waiting for Richard; he knows more than either of us. Here he is now.

I: What did the place look like, any details outside, any remembrances about the setting of the house or farm?

RK: Well I can tell you about trees, I was the one who took them out when they died. There were several dozen chestnuts. Burbank was interested in getting rid of the blight that the Eastern Chestnuts had. Just to the right of the driveway where the gate was there was Scotch broom and white blackberry that Burbank developed, above that seedless persimmons. Then about there's stamen apples, a Stark variety, four or five sweet black cherries, a small tree called a cranberry plum, an experimental plum. On top of the hill were live oaks. I cut them for firewood as we had nothing for heat except the fireplace and kitchen stove, there was an electric stove and water heater, but it was never used because of cost and no water. Originally, we got water from the cemetery. There was a pipe, but it was removed years before when (John) Breger was there.

GK: There was a cistern, during an earthquake it cracked.

RK: There was a cherry tree in front of the house, south side of the house that at one time had 550 varieties on it. My dad went to Santa Rosa and became manager of the Burbank gardens there. They didn't pay him very much so the trustees of the Jr. College (Santa Rosa Junior College), (they owned the gardens at that time), told him to augment his stipend any way he could, so he got permission to set up a little stand and so he sold postcards and seed packets with a booklet on "Hints to the wise about seed sowing".

I: What year would that be?

RK: 1934. He got here in '31, went back in '32, got rid of the house and back in '34.

I: That was the height of the Depression.



RK: Missouri was a good place to be from at that time. He had all the fruit and nuts, we had a farm to live on rent free. Stark paid the telephone bill. To get back to what was there—going further up near the Royal walnut were large pear trees with several varieties on them. Several rows of plums, a fence with grapes 15 varieties, a Chinese grape, beautiful foliage, a little bitty blue grape, not a compact bunch. Fifty yards south, English walnuts, European ash, mountain ash—a whole row of those. Further near the cemetery there were small trees of Starks, delicious and almond trees, a bitter almond then up to the south a patch of 100 varieties of cherries.

I: How many trees would that have been?

RK: About 40 or 50 trees, you see these were planted about 2 feet apart. He would drop a colored string over a tree if the fruit came and it was of no value he'd chop there and graft another on, so there would be trees with three or four grafts on them. There was one specific one so large only way it was held up was the other ones around it. You see if you are going to graft a stone fruit, any of the except cherries, you can graft interchangeably—as nectarines are just a peach without any fuzz on them. If you plant peach trees once in awhile you get some without fuzz, so you've got a nectarine – they are not hybrid.

Mrs. Burbank had the whole south side, her own orchard.

Barn 20 feet across and lean to shed, two-story structure, stalls downstairs for four horses. No pictures – not full pictures of Burbank's place, no place to take a panoramic picture. Thirteen acres when we came here, had been 16. We have a topical map—angles of roads etc.

Inside the house? I can remember it. Here is a yellow brick fireplace and bookcases on each side, windows on each side of the door, bedroom long plain room. Cupboards in the kitchen, ice box. Front room across the front of the house 24' square, floor was just bare. Cases painted white or cream colored. Had cupboards and a wood burning stove we brought it with us. Never had water, had 27-gallon tank made and held on the running board of the car, put it on a bench outside the house. Bed upstairs in the barn where Burbank stayed overnight. His files and chair went to Santa Rosa library or should be in the house if we ever get it.



RK: Do you remember the Kon tree in front of Sebastopol Grammar School on Bodega Avenue near the firehouse? Tree was so big needed a bulldozer to get out the stump, it was 10' across and pulled out by the biggest caterpillar that had at the time.

I: Did you have help at the farm?

RK: No, just me. I was going to school then. I made letter openers out of the cherry tree with 500 varieties on it. Sold them at the Gardens in Santa Rosa and sent one to (Henry) Ford. I got a letter back saying "Thanks" from his secretary.

GK: He and Burbank and (Harvey) Firestone were very close.

(Mrs. Keil showing letter opener made by Richard and his father Joseph.)

End